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The Gazette

ARTS AND ENTERTAINMENT

Worth the ride?
Whether you'll enjoy the movie Road Trip depends a great deal on your age. Our teenage reviewer loved it, but a 30-something reporter found it a less-than-amusing detour. *Page D4*

Cheaters rule
On the eve of final exams across the continent comes Cheaters, a movie about an unscrupulous teacher in inner-city Chicago who tells his kids to win at any cost, Mike Boone writes. *Page D7*

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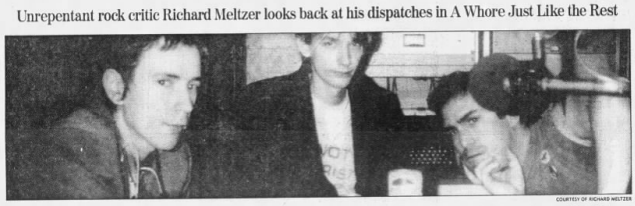
ENTERTAINMENT DEPARTMENT: (514) 987-2560
SATURDAY, MAY 20, 2000

FROM GAZETTE FILES

The Sound and the Fury

Unrepentant rock critic Richard Meltzer looks back at his dispatches in A Whore Just Like the Rest



COURTESY OF RICHARD MELTZER

Richard Meltzer (right) with Sex Pistol John Lydon (left) and Keith Levene of Public Image Limited on Meltzer's radio show, Hepcats From Hell, in Los Angeles around 1979. He later wrote L.A. Is the Capital of Kansas: Painful Lessons in Post-New York Living. Top: Punk concert.

"Y'know, it's funny. Once there was no rock'n'roll in anybody's life, then there was, and it was nearly all there was. It filled up the world as lived and was the shape you gave to events and used to frame units of time and measure the durability of relationships; it was the coding for everything from passion to purpose to flat to deed to audacity to indifference. The world, once empty of it, then full.

"Today, even when emptied of actual content, of that cluster of gist and substance which memory has resigned to the dumpet, the fullness lingers on, fully, emptily, too fully (and far too emptily) for anyone's goddamn good."

– A Whore Just Like the Rest, by Richard Meltzer

JUAN RODRIGUEZ
Special to The Gazette

Meltzer's voice – reading from A Whore Just Like the Rest, his recently published anthology of 128 music pieces – is an matter-of-fact as a cup reading a rag sheet. Almost desultory, the monotone strictly New York, the voice nevertheless carries the conviction of a poet hanging on every word.

Meltzer invented rock writing around 1965 – not better-knowns like Lester Bangs and Nick Tosches, or Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus – and remains its philosopher king, the living embodiment of its true rogue spirit.

When the music was new and exciting and swept you away, before it became mere product two or three years later, he concocted The Aesthetics of Rock (1970), which started as an undergraduate philosophy paper. A chunk of it was published in Crawdaddy, the first rag to take rock'n'roll "seriously." Reading Aesthetics was nothing short of thrilling for fans who aspired to capture their enthusiasm for the music in writing (and perhaps make a living from it). The footnote flooded tome – which some saw as a cosmic joke on academic analysis – mentioned Pythagoras ("the original Mr Music") in the same breath as the Rolling Stones, linked Heidegger to Little Anthony and the Imperials, and so on.

"Looking back on my long parade," Meltzer told me from his home in Portland, Ore., in a ho-hum tone that betrayed a touch of pride, "Aesthetics reminds me more of a box of greasy, broken automobile parts than writing. But I like the box and the parts. It came to terms with the entire gestalt of what passed for rock'n'roll in 1965. It wasn't even like anyone was making art – it was just an emanation of self, like breathing, sweating."

Hailed as a masterwork, Aesthetics has also been damned as unreadable (topping The Book of Rock Lists as "worst rock book"). The comparisons to Hunter Thompson, Tom Wolfe, Charles Bukowski, H.L. Mencken and Bangs are glib conventional wisdom or hype.

Meltzer's unpleasant. He's demanding (including syntax and style of his own invention, and connections that seem to come out of nowhere until you re-read them and – presto! – they're right on the money). Lip service has been occasionally paid to his status as "icon," but his uncompromising, intensely iconoclastic approach, in manners and profession, made him an eccentric, a nuisance, to rock establishment careerists who sprang up like weeds in his wake.

His new anthology, A Whore Just Like the Rest, evens the score. At nearly 600 pages, it's a big, unholy slab of meat, dripping blood. It's a profoundly personal take on the music scene over the past 35 years, and – with its dirty-laundry introductions – of one writer's life coping with it.

The tone is scurrilous, scabrous, scatological and occasionally, well, sentimental. There are careening impressions and insights into Woodstock and the whole West Coast shtick. There are not-so-fond reminiscences of former friends (like Patti Smith, who a few years after publicly announcing that "rock'n'roll is anything Richard Meltzer does," asked him brusquely to pick up a paper cup she'd tossed from her yellow Cadillac limo because "I don't want my fans to see me litter"). There are trenchant takes on anyone and everyone from Bruce Springsteen – "master of the ersatz" – to Lawrence Welk, from country music to jazz.

There are riotous road stories and tales of life at parties (lunch with Tanya Tucker, "got to put my hand on her leg"), of psychic disease and rock death (Who'll Be the Next in Line?). There are examples of so-called "intentional bad writing," committing "acts of mischief," when he roared through six pieces a day. There's an exhilarating section on the vital Los Angeles punk scene of the late '70s. There are finely wrought long pieces, like Of Peep Shows and Piano Bars, The Last Wrestling Piece, the furious One White Man's Opinion on the Rodney King riots and the haunting, climactic Vinyl Reckoning, a meditation on moment and memory.

And there are swatches of vitriol on status-seeking industry pooh-bahs – or, "critics" – and a movingly clear-eyed section on Bangs, the dead acolyte with whom he's inextricably linked.

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Meltzer is a short man with slightly bowed legs, a large head, thick, dark eyebrows, lamplighter eyes and a jaw that occasionally clenches when the conversation gets intense. For all his worry, there's no gray in his hair.

He was born in 1945, in Rockaway, N.Y., "a sleazy beach community" (later immortalized by the Ramones) that he hated by the age of 5. His favourite TV show in the early '50s was a dinnertime compendium of serials from the '30s and '40s, half of them starring Buster Crabbe, with such protagonists as Buck Rogers, Flash Gordon and Ace Drummond.

Soon he started following wrestling, "the first sport that meant anything to me" (he's been in the arena about 130 times). Then rock'n'roll struck. Elvis on Ed Sullivan, Bo Diddley and Chuck Berry at the Brooklyn Paramount.

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Arcand waits, nervously

Director looks cool, but he's not, as Stardom's big night nears at Cannes

BRENDAN KELLY
The Gazette

CANNES – Denys Arcand is looking tanned and relaxed sitting in the lounge of the Savoy Hotel, just a short walk up from the beach. He soon confesses, however, that he is not quite as carefree as he looks.

The celebrated Montreal film-maker has been in Cannes for a couple of days but he hasn't been all that busy yet. His real-life partner – and producer – Denise Robert is the one running up and down the Croisette deal-making, while Arcand takes it easy waiting for a round of press interviews and tomorrow's official closing-night gala screening of his film Stardom.

Arcand and Robert are here with their 4-year-old daughter, and Arcand takes her swimming in the Mediterranean and lets her play on the kiddie carousel near the Palais des Festivals.

But mostly the 58-year-old writer-director waits. Even after the Oscar nominations, the Genie wins and the impressive international box-office returns for The Decline of the American Empire and Jesus of Montreal, Arcand still gets nervous before a major event like this. This avid golfer would much rather be on the links than hanging out in this gorgeous but gaudy Cote d'Azur town counting down the minutes until the world premiere of Stardom.

"I'd rather be home doing anything but this," said Arcand, who was dressed in a white T-shirt, khaki pants and running shoes. "It's nerve-racking. Your life changes, for better or for worse. And you're only as good as your last picture."

Arcand's last major film was 1989's Love and Human Remains, based on the controversial play by Brad Fraser.

Stardom, the most eagerly anticipated Canadian film of the year, stars 18-year-old Montreal newcomer Jessica Paré as a teenager from Cornwall who is catapulted from the amateur hockey rinks of small-town Ontario to the fashion runways of New York, Paris and London.

Shot in English but with large chunks of French dialogue, the glitzy flick also features Don Aykroyd as an ambitious restaurateur, Thomas Gibson from Dharma and Greg as a slimy agent, Frank Langella as the Canadian ambassador to the United Nations, Charles Berling as a French fashion photographer, and theatre and film director Robert Lepage as a documentary film-maker.

The Cannes festival has been key for Arcand's career. The Arcand films that have gone to Cannes have had 10 times the success of the ones that didn't make it there. Even though this is his fifth visit to the prestigious French film fest, Arcand is still no jaded veteran.

Please see ARCAND, *Page D4*

COURTESY OF ALLIANCE FILMS

Montreal's Jessica Paré in Stardom.

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